Letters of Support: What to ask for and what to leave out.

Make sure letters from consultants, collaborators, and other project partners get to the point and stay there. The SBIR/STTR reviewers who will be reading your Letters of Support are looking for key information that will give them a better understanding of why the project will be a success, so they can make more informed reviews.

Reviewers need to understand — quickly and clearly —the role of the letter writer in the project and their level of commitment. Any superfluous information can waste the reviewer's time and cause the letter to be ignored.

Here are a few best practices to keep in mind:
Letters should be addressed to the Principal Investigator (PI) on the project or a specific Business Official (CEO, CTO, CFO, etc.) at the company. They should not be addressed to the National Institutes of Health.

Subcontractor Letters should clearly describe who is working on the project, their role, the time commitment involved, and the overall budget. These letters must be written by the legal entity at the institution (Office for Sponsored Research, Contracts Office, Dean of Research, etc.) and must be on the organization's letterhead.

Consultant Letters must specify time commitment, what guidance they are providing, and level of compensation.

Commercialization Partner Letters are typically for Phase II proposals. These come from potential investors, distributors, strategic partners, prospective customers, potential licensees, and more. They are designed to demonstrate a market need and clear commercial path for the product along with the company's ability to attract the resources necessary to successfully commercialize the product.

Don't include general letters that have no specific commitment to the company or project. These will go in one eye and out the other when reviewers look at them. *That said, if the author of the letter is an acknowledged leader in the appropriate field or a representative from a major company giving you a strong endorsement, those letters can be helpful.*

Give your support team plenty of time to write the letters. Don't wait until the last minute.

Letters should focus on your support teams involvement and commitment. Put charts, graphs, tables, preliminary data, research methodology, or background details in the Research Strategy section of your application, *not the support letters.*

How should support letters be structured?
Paragraph #1:
- Who is the organization and what is their position in the technology or marketplace that shows that their commercial opinion and commitment is credible?

Paragraph #2:
- Summarize their understanding of your innovation.
- How do they view the problem that the innovation addresses?
- What do they consider to be the current state-of-the-art and what are its shortcomings?
- What technical challenges or market hurdles might prevent more robust solutions?
- What type of solution might be most attractive to prospective customers?

Paragraph #3:
- What is the commercial opportunity for your solution?
- What are the challenges to commercializing the innovation, and why can the writer help mitigate or overcome them?

Paragraph #4 (Required for Phase II Letters of Commitment):
- What is the writer willing to commit to bring the technology into Phase III Commercialization (funding, licensing, inclusion in product line, product testing, OEM manufacturing, etc.)
- If there are any contingencies on this commitment, note them. Acceptable contingencies include:
  - Receipt of the Phase II award;
  - Achievement of Phase II technical objectives (or some defined milestone);
  - Resulting technology is not bypassed in the marketplace during Phase II;
  - Potential technology/product continues to appear economically viable at the end of Phase II.

Always offer your time if they have any questions. Provide your phone or email information, if they don't already have it.

Two final check points before the letters are sent:
1. Work with each letter writer to make sure they're all saying something different.
2. Recommend having the letter writers ask themselves if *they* would be impressed by their letter.

BBCetc can help answer any questions on your SBIR/STTR application. If you need more information, please contact Andrea Johanson at andrea@bbcetc.com.